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By

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Debra Levin Gelman shows you how to design for them

When I sat down to read "Design For Kids" by Debra Levin Gelman, I had mixed expectations. The blog seemed pretty good, but I have found these types of books can be a bit lightweight. You can skim them in 30 minutes, pick out a few pointers, and move on with a couple of ideas to try out. What Gelman does with her book is everything I did not even realize I was hoping for: Psychological backgrounds, design guidelines, case studies, research advice, and more.

What kind of kid should I design for?

Gelman begins the book by giving a little background about kids and design. She does a nice job of covering some topics that we Blinkers discuss around the lunch table, including the difference between surprising and delighting (or as she calls it, "lagniappe," which I think is awesome) a user. She then gives a loose framework for design before delving into insights from Piaget's theories of cognitive development.

Now those are all fairly large topics. Classes have been taught about some of them, but Gelman does a good job of keeping it high level and talking about what you need to know. She then

dives into the actual meat of the book: How to handle designing for the different levels of cognitive development.

She breaks them down into the age ranges you might expect: 2-4, 4-6, 6-8, 10-12. She explores all of the different aspects you need to understand when designing for these age ranges: when you need to let the kids explore, when you need to make sure they understand the rules, when you need to let the kids break the rules, etc. But you always let them play, regardless of the age range.

Breaking it down

While the structure of the chapters were typical textbook, the way she presented the information and broke down her points was really enjoyable. Gelman begins each chapter by giving you a rundown of who exactly the kids are followed by a table of the most important points you'll need for designing for that age group. If I was just skimming the book I could have stopped there. And in the future, I know I'll be coming back to those tables. But if I had stopped there I would have missed the depth she goes into about why those are the important points. She then follows up the points with great case studies. At the end of the chapter she lists helpful questions to review everything you just read. It felt like a little pop-quiz to make sure you learned what she set out to teach. I never thought I'd be happy with a pop-quiz, but here we are. That's a sign of maturity, not age, right?

Research

Gelman uses research to support her cases in her chapters about age ranges and the examples she describes. She does a great job of talking about what you need for research for that particular age group. That's why I was disappointed with the chapter on research. The structure was not nearly as clear as the rest of the book. I found I would get lost about which age group she was discussing. And I didn't discover additional insights beyond what had come before. While I'm glad she has a chapter that discusses the importance of how to handle research, I felt this was handled better throughout the rest of the book. This chapter felt like an afterthought that was put in without a true goal.

Quotes

One of the nice little extras, or lagniappe, in the book were the quotes used at the beginning of each chapter. From Plato to Douglas Adams, they set the stage for the discussion she presented in the chapter and put a smile on my face.

Conclusion

I think it's clear that I liked this book and would recommend it to researchers and designers alike, despite my criticisms of the one research chapter. I didn't even mention the interviews and examples she puts in this book so you have a clear understanding of all you will need when designing for, and researching, kids.

This is also a good book for understanding design in general even if you never have any intention on designing for kids. Several times I would make notes in the column that the point being made could be applied to adults, and Gelman would then point out how you could use it with adults. I love it when an author is able to anticipate my questions and responses.

This is a comprehensive book about design. Check it out. Perhaps most importantly it will

remind you of the importance of play.

Jonathan is both an Interaction Design and User Research pro, as well as the semi-official tie-wearing Blink UX mascot. When not considering switching to a modeling career, Jonathan can be seen playing with his ridiculously cute family.